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Proposal for a **Frontline** program—or series—on
the hidden dangers of U.S. nuclear weapons policy

The American Doomsday Machine

I learned in the Sixties-- from my classified work as a RAND Corporation researcher and consultant to CINCPAC, the Office of Secretary of Defense, the State Department and the White House on nuclear command and control and nuclear war plans—some of the most sensitive and closely-guarded secrets of U.S. nuclear weapons policies.

I believe these are urgently timely to expose and debate today. Almost surely they still relate to dangerous aspects of nuclear policy not only in the US and Russia, but in all other nuclear weapons states, Pakistan in particular.

I am prepared--by revealing previously-undisclosed specifics and documents from my official, classified studies—to help **Frontline** expose, by its own investigations and with the aim of stimulating unprecedented Congressional hearings, any or all of the following hidden realities, long held secret from the American public:

I. American planning for a hundred Holocausts. For half a century strategic nuclear forces of the US have been kept operationally ready, on the command of the president (or one of a number of subordinates: see IV below), to kill several hundreds of million--or more than a billion--people, by simultaneous nuclear attacks on hundreds of cities.

At the end of the Eisenhower era, this was the *only* option offered to the president for engaging in any conflict with Soviet forces, no matter how, where, or by whom it was initiated. The Joint Chiefs of Staff estimate of the number of deaths resulting directly from executing that plan was some six hundred million killed. A hundred Holocausts.

That estimate was their answer to a question I drafted for President Kennedy to ask them in the spring of 1961. Their calculation was, in retrospect, a gross underestimate, at least by a factor of two, perhaps (with current population) by an order of magnitude (see II below).

Although a mass attack on “urban-industrial centers” is no longer the only choice for a National Command Authority—in 1961-62 I helped draft guidance for alternatives to it directed by Secretary of Defense McNamara—that “option” almost certainly remains in the operational readiness plans for the alert force. That should be investigated—by **Frontline** and Congress--and changed.

II. The Doomsday Machines: nuclear winter. Scientific studies and modeling in 1982-84 revealed--and much more definitive modeling in 2004-08 has confirmed-- that if the option described above were executed (by the US, or Russia, or both), clouds of soot and smoke from the simultaneous burning of hundreds of cities would block sunlight for a prolonged period in the northern hemisphere, and possibly around the globe, causing “nuclear winter.” An attack in spring or summer would freeze lakes and rivers and destroy all crops, bringing mass starvation and the destruction of civilization in the northern hemisphere and possibly worldwide. It could cause near- or total human extinction.

In 1960, my colleague Herman Kahn at the RAND Corporation imagined a hypothetical Doomsday Machine that would destroy all life on earth if triggered by some undesired event. He presented it as a “thought-experiment,” a hypothetical device that offered itself as the “ultimate deterrent” yet was self-evidently undesirable. (Inappropriate; non-optimal; euphemisms are unavoidable: there are no words for it).

What neither Kahn nor anyone else knew at the time was that such a system actually existed. The United States (not yet, the Soviet Union) had constructed it. The U.S. strategic air and naval forces, programmed to execute the then-single war-plan for any conflict with Soviet forces, *were* a potential Doomsday Machine. They still are. Within a few years, the Soviet Union had acquired a comparable capability, which Russia maintains.

Yet discovery of this fact over twenty years later, a quarter-century ago, reportedly led to no change whatever in operational US nuclear planning. *Frontline*--and Congress--should investigate the likelihood that this is still, inexcusably, true.

If so, it is not only the American public and Congress that should demand decisive changes in US (and corresponding Russian) plans and readiness; it is the right of every person in every state in the world to make that demand. (That would be true for such plans even without the prospect of nuclear winter.)

This applies not only to operational plans but to force size and structure. The Obama administration is reportedly aiming to reduce, by bilateral agreement the number of operational US and Russian warheads down to 1500 each (from 1700 to 2200), and possibly lower to 1000 each. But 1000 warheads are still capable of causing nuclear winter, the worldwide destruction of civilization and possibly of humanity.

There should not exist on earth--there should never have existed-- *one* “nuclear-winter-capable state,” one Doomsday Machine, let alone two, as at present. (If nuclear testing should resume, France and perhaps China would quickly develop multiple warheads for their missiles, becoming the third and fourth states whose leaders were capable of destroying civilization and possibly the human species.)

This points to the urgent necessity of reducing, as quickly as possible, operational nuclear arsenals of the US and Russia to well *below* one thousand total for both (and nailing down a permanent ban on nuclear testing).

Moreover, more recent scientific studies conclude that even a very much smaller nuclear exchange involving as few as one hundred Hiroshima-sized explosions—such as could occur between India and Pakistan—could have prolonged effects on the ozone layer that protects the earth from ultraviolet radiation, with devastating effects on health and crops, as well as climatic effects greater than any in recorded history.

This implies that even the smallest nuclear arsenals—at the level of fifty rather than thousands, for the US and Russia as well as for others-- are larger than can remotely be justified in terms of their possible and likely effects on the world at large.

III. How many fingers on the buttons? The well-known image of the presidential “football”—the briefcase that always accompanies a president containing codes for executing various nuclear options—is meant to convey that only the president can launch nuclear attacks. That is a hoax.

Contrary to public belief, deceptively encouraged by successive American administrations, there have always been a great many American fingers on a number of nuclear buttons, distributed around the world in American nuclear commands.

Every president since Eisenhower has secretly delegated authority to launch nuclear operations to nuclear-capable theater commanders under certain conditions, such as inability to communicate with Washington during a crisis or presidential incapacitation (like Eisenhower’s heart attack and stroke).

(I revealed this—a very closely-held secret even within the government--to McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy’s Assistant for National Security, in the first month of his administration.. Only recently—after decades of unsuccessful efforts by me to have it investigated by Congress and mainstream media--have documents confirming this for Eisenhower and Kennedy been declassified, still largely unknown to the public.)

It is essential, of course, that it be known to the Russians and others that they cannot paralyze American nuclear retaliation by a single warhead on Washington. (For the same reason, the Russians have made similar arrangements: as have, almost certainly, the Pakistanis and every other nuclear weapons state).

But this delegation has been one of our most sensitively protected secrets from the American people, lest they be, for good reason, concerned that nuclear war might occur by the authorized but mistaken decision of one or another of many commanders below the level of the president. This realistic danger would be in addition to the real and also under-investigated risks (another of my past professional subjects) of false alarms, accidents and unauthorized actions.

Past Congressional hearings have been misled by deceptive official testimony on the existence of delegation. *Frontline* should seek current answers, both by exploring possible sources and by stimulating new Congressional demands for truthful testimony on how many American fingers are on buttons, whose they are, and what can be known about the probable situation in other nuclear weapons states, in particular Russia, India, North Korea, Israel, and above all, Pakistan.

IV. The inexcusable dangers of US and Russian missile alert posture. Although thousands of nuclear weapons have been withdrawn from operational status (and some dismantled) in the US and Russian arsenals by arms reduction agreements, thousands remain on operational alert, ready for preemptive launch on radar and satellite warning of imminent attack. Such warning could easily be mistaken, with a great many false alarms having already occurred, some coming seriously close to irrevocable, catastrophic decision to launch US or Russian forces.

With the ending of the Cold War a generation ago, the persistence of this danger to humanity is outrageous, intolerably reckless. The urgency of “de-alerting” is widely recognized among defense experts, but political pressure has been lacking to counteract institutional inertia. *Frontline* could create the public awareness needed to change that.

V. The esoteric lunacy of US-Russian “damage limitation.” Even during the latter half of the Cold War, the insiders’ rationale for these alert forces—and for the nature and scale of our offensive force altogether--was entirely outmoded. Their targets, on each side, were largely military (in addition to the fraction devoted to cities), with the aim of limiting damage to the side that struck first by destroying the other’s offensive weapons preemptively.

But with the multiplication on both sides of hardened and submarine missiles, and with delegation on both sides precluding effective “decapitation,” the achievement of significant damage limitation by preemptive first strike has been a wild fantasy since the mid-Sixties. It has been sustained by nothing other than the special interests of the Services and the military-industrial complexes in both countries in producing and deploying large and continuously “modernized” strategic forces.

(Reports this week that President Obama has abandoned for this year’s arms negotiations his earlier aim of a ceiling of one thousand missiles each, in favor of the still more excessive ceiling of 1500 missiles each-- if true--undoubtedly reflect the seductive effects of this insiders’ rationale, pressed privately by these still-powerful interests.)

With the current pressure on government budgets, this is a good time for *Frontline* to expose the myths of “damage limitation” and “preemption” that have-- unknown to the public—provided government insiders and the aerospace industry with an esoteric rationale —absurdly divorced from realities for at least forty years -- for the bloated and dangerous nuclear forces.

VI. The hidden history and impact of US first-use threats. It is a widespread misconception that no nuclear weapons have been used since Nagasaki. US presidents have used them dozens of times, in confrontations—in the exact same sense that a gun is being used when it is pointed at someone's head, whether or not the trigger is pulled. It is a myth that the use of nuclear weapons in circumstances other than nuclear attack on the US or its forces has been “unthinkable” in the Oval Office.

On the contrary, every president since Truman has had occasion, usually in secret from the American public, sometimes but not always bluffing, to threaten or to entertain consideration of possible imminent initiation of nuclear attack in a confrontation.

That continues into the present. Only last year, not only the president but every major presidential candidate was emphatically declaring that “all options are on the table” with respect to Iran. (TV interviewer to President Bush: “Does that include nuclear weapons?” Bush: “I said, all options.”) According to leading journalists, high-level sources leaked that Vice President Cheney had directed the readiness of nuclear operations against Iranian underground sites and other targets.

This largely-unknown, long-time pattern of consideration and use has everything to do with why each president has maintained vast, ready and widely deployed nuclear forces, how it is that each of them has in effect provoked and promoted nuclear proliferation, and with how close the world has actually come on several past occasions to nuclear war. The real risks of the nuclear era, including current and future ones, and the current obstacles to reducing these risks, can only be understood in light of this secret history.

My own official, classified studies of nuclear crises and threats, including the Cuban Missile Crisis (in which I participated, and which came literally within an arms-length of erupting into all-out nuclear war and nuclear winter), made me almost uniquely aware of this pattern by the Seventies. (Nixon’s justified fear that I knew and might reveal his own nuclear threats against North Vietnam led to his creation of the “plumbers” unit in the White House to silence me, which led to his downfall.) Some of the documents and information I propose to disclose for the first time are on this issue.

VII. The hoax of US “non-proliferation” policy. As I became aware in the Pentagon in the Sixties, unequivocal USG opposition to nuclear proliferation has always been another myth. There has always been, secretly, split opinion on this within the government, with the highest-level view generally prevailing that proliferation to selected friendly states should be secretly accepted or even supported. This has facilitated proliferation in Israel, India, and Pakistan (even though some other programs, such as Taiwan and South Korea, have been discouraged).

Along with the past and continuing US first-use threats, this selective toleration or encouragement of proliferation has promoted still further proliferation in less friendly states, as in North Korea, earlier in Iraq, and possibly Iran now. More than that, it makes an effective US or worldwide non-proliferation policy virtually unattainable.

This can't be changed unless and until the US effectively abandons its own reliance on first-use threats, along with the force readiness to carry them out (dismantling its thousands of tactical nuclear weapons, and the preemptive land-based missile forces that back them up).

Only then could it lead—instead of resisting, as it has until now—a worldwide movement to delegitimize and eliminate threats of first-use of nuclear weapons. And only thus can incentives to acquire or maintain nuclear forces be eliminated for states now threatened with first-use by the US or others or tempted to imitate the first-use threats of the US and NATO.

In the context of such a US-led movement, accompanied by a radical shift in US nuclear weapons policy, there would be considerable promise in efforts to negotiate a definitive commitment from Iran (and other—effectively inspected—to forego any enrichment of its uranium to weapons-grade or production of nuclear weapons. Without that shift and movement, there is virtually no likelihood of blocking such developments—other than illegal, uncertain and highly dangerous US or Israeli attack.

Frontline should expose, for the first time on television, both this hidden US reliance on first-use threats and its bearing on risks of nuclear war, on proliferation, and on the vastly excessive overall US nuclear forces (which are largely structured to back up the credibility of US first-use threats).

[This is a draft. To come: A summing up, which will briefly show how these separate issues are closely related, leading to convergent implications for certain urgent and relatively simple policy proposals, including a no-first-use policy and the elimination of both tactical and U.S. land-based missiles. Strategic warheads should be reduced quickly to a combined total of well under one thousand for both the US and Russia.]